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編者的話

一年容易，又是本會舉行 AGM 的時候，也是本屆幹事會把工作交予新一屆幹事的時候，回顧本屆會訊的編輯出版工作，共出版了二期會訊，相信看過第一期的會員都會發現會訊的內容和編輯方向有別於以往。內容上，我們加增了專題文章的部份，使刊物更能代表本會的專業性，而編輯目標亦是朝專業機關刊物的方向邁進，除專訪及徵集稿件外，亦會就設定主題特約撰稿，力求使每期的討論焦點集中，題旨鮮明。

第一期的主題基本是討論博物館的發展和其歷史的使命，我們一面回顧本港政府博物館的百年歷史，另一方面則探究未來的方向，並以歷史檔案館專訪作為借鑑。本期的主題則在博物館的社會角色及營運，從本港博物館到世界各地博物館的經營、管理及運作模式作多角度探討。我們期望會訊能引起博物館同業對共同關心的課題加以討論，並藉以加強交流聯繫，並肩負起建立博物館專業形象的更長遠目標。

隨 香港大學專業進修學院與悉尼大學合辦的博物館學課程的畢業人次，及具有碩士或博士學位的同業均不斷增加，使博物館同業的專業水平不斷提升，我們的會訊亦應反映這一趨勢，並期望令社會人士對博物館的專業加深認識。

回首過去一年的編輯工作，當中亦面對不少困難，由於內容的加增，印刷成本必須謹慎控制，而在印刷的質素上更未云盡善，在美觀內容的兩難下，我們選擇了後者，期望會員體諒。此外，礙於人手有限，約稿、排版、編輯的時間緊迫，本年原擬出版三期，合僅能完成二期，第三期的部分稿件將交予新屆幹事會出版，謹此向各位致歉。

得到本屆幹事會成員的通力合作，會員的踴躍投稿，特約作者的惠賜鴻文，最重要是您的支持，使本刊順利出版，謹此真誠致以萬分謝意。

MUSEUM: FROM THE 1890S TO THE 1990S

Sunny TANG Hing-sun

I. INTRODUCTION

Museums are not merely neutral exhibition spaces for displaying objects, according to cultural critics, they embody a number of fundamental notions or concepts which constitute the basis of an institutional practice or politics when they are viewed from the socio-political context. First, museums adopt a system for classifying objects to construct their own discursive fields. Second, in the eyes of the governing body, museums, together with other cultural institutions, are envisaged as an apparatus for the education of the public and the regulation of the social behaviour of individuals. However, since the introduction of the term “museum”, there are actually a shift in our understanding on the functions and roles of museums. As a key cultural institution of the contemporary society, it is therefore necessary to investigate on the current functions and roles of museums so as to get a clear picture of their relationship to our lives.

In the following discussions, special attention will be drawn to art museums. It is because in this area of the museum culture severe challenges have been received from the artists, who are regarded as one of the major innovators of change to the cultural scene especially in the contemporary time.

II. CONCEPT OF THE MUSEUM IN THE 1890S

A. Cultural Background

The 19th century saw the rapid growth in the number of museums and this period is regarded as the era of public museums. This is the result of the emergence of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century that causes the increasing importance of the middle classes, the development of political democracy and the spread of education in vernacular languages.¹ The growth of public museums has often been associated with the social emergence of the bourgeoisie and the start of a new age of leisure and tourism.

In this context, large private collections shifted into public or government ownership, and museums began to open to public.

B. Civilizing Rituals

Some people may adopt the critical perspective that public museums were born during the Age of Imperialism, they often served and benefited capitalism, and continue to be instruments of the ruling classes and corporate powers.ⁱⁱ Ever since the genesis of the public museum, it was conceived as educational institutions for the civilizing process of the masses: it serves as a primary instrument of civic education, aiming at modernizing the individual to the high point of civilization's advance.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the education of the masses emerged as a new form of population management, it was targeted at the collected good of the state rather than for the benefit of individual knowledge.^{iv} Rules were established to regulate the masses. The museum space has to be re-articulated to achieve this objective. Architecturally, sources were derived from contemporary buildings like shopping arcades, railway stations, etc. It includes the use of new materials, the space is arranged so as to put the audience into a orderly flow and the provision of elevated vantage points.^v As a result, the museum is one of the apparatuses that created "docile bodies" through disciplinary technologies.^{vi} The British cultural reformer Sir Henry Cole had aptly put it: "the Museum will certainly lead him (the working man) to wisdom and gentleness".^{vii}

On the other hand, public museums are deliberately designed to resemble older ceremonial monuments. Their architecture is comparable to the Greek and Roman temples, the abbeys and cathedrals of the Middle Ages, or Renaissance and Baroque palaces. Not only the specific architectural references that make museums resembles older ritual sites, but also the settings of the museums are culturally designated for contemplation and learning of the public. Museums are set apart from other structures, they are approached by flights of stairs. They are also frequently set back from the street by sculptural markers and occupy parkland. Such models for the design of public museums are continuously employed in the 20th century. The vast majority of museum buildings in the early part of the 20th century were in the form of Neo-classical temples, and the Neo-classical idiom was adapted to an endless number of temples of art around the world from America to Russia, using the established classical symbol of cultural heritage and dignity.

In so doing, a ritual process is experienced by the visitor to the museum, the climb to the museum door is like going to churches or cathedrals, and individuals are therefore perfectly predisposed socially, psychologically, and culturally to enact the museum ritual.

C. The Shaping of Knowledge

Over the last 600 years, museums have been active in the shaping of knowledge, but how “knowledge” is shaped changed drastically in the past.^{viii} The values and priorities that are taken for granted in museums today are not the same as in the past.

When museums took over royal collections in the 18th century, they also took on a number of new functions that resulted in the emergence of a museum profession. New technologies of administration and curatorship had been developed. One of the essential aspects of the change in the first half of the 19th century from “cabinets of curiosities” to museums was the introduction of systems of scientific classification and interpretation of artefacts. Collections were grouped according to evolutionary stage. Moreover, the museum becomes a temple not just in the way how it is designed architecturally, but also for the values it reaffirms: “museums were the temples within which they enshrined those things they held to be significant and valuable. The public generally accepted the idea that if it was in the museum, it was not only real but represented a standard of excellence. If the museum said that this and that was so, then that was a statement of truth”.^{ix} The museum becomes closer in function to the church than to the school, it therefore reflects an “objective” view of reality by virtue of its status as a custodian of the socially approved definitions of social reality.

This articulates the museum into a new ensemble of oppositions within a new regime of truth including private/public, closed/open, tyranny/liberty, superstition/knowledge, inherited wealth/courage as compared to the past.^x Accordingly, new functional divisions emerged. Objects that were shown to the small group of the privileged class in the past had been exposed to a larger part of the “mass” including different hierarchies of classes for the purpose of democratic education. Knowledge is thus offered for passive consumption, and museums became one of the apparatuses to create “docile bodies” through disciplinary technologies.

III. Changes in the Concept of the Museum in the 1990s

A. Cultural Background

The emergence of industrialization had brought about the rise of the middle class in the 18th century. Consequently, the technological development has contributed to the coming of the post-industrial society, which is characterized by the new technologies for mass production coupled with the new technologies of communication. In this context, the post-industrial society becomes an information-based society in which the production, dissemination and use of information is a principal force of production; therefore, the modernist society that marks the previous century has changed because the technical and social conditions of communication have changed.

On the cultural aspect, there is no longer a clear division between the producer of knowledge and the passive consumer, but the fragmentation or the pluralism that enable other voices and other worlds to communicate to form the so-called intertextual network derived from the theory of “Deconstructionism” (a movement initiated by the philosopher Derrida in the late 1960s). There is also the closing of the gap between popular culture and cultural production, leading to a simple and direct surrender to commodification, commercialization and the market. Its impact on the museum culture can be seen in the following aspects.

B. The Democratization Impact

The 20th century witnessed the dramatic widening of the museum audience, which is the continuity to the development of the public museum during the 19th century, but a question arises: does the astronomical number of visitors really reflect a complete democratization of the museum? Or is it just the consolidation of elitism?

In art museums, there are mainly two models concerning the ideals of what an art museum should be. They are the educational museum and the aesthetic museum ^{xi} In the educational museum, works of art are framed as historical or art-historical objects, while in the aesthetic museum their unique and transcendent qualities are primary, and the museum space is expected to provide a sanctuary for their contemplation. The former is usually considered to be more democratic and popular, while the latter is seen as more elitist. To dismiss the charge of elitism, art museums are responsible to enhance

the public's understanding through a series of educational activities provided to the public.

a. Museums and the Public

The democratic idea is a revolutionary populist notion that ordinary people - the "public" - should have a right to free access to knowledge and to its use, and they are empowered to speak about themselves on their cultures and histories.

The consumer culture in the late 20th century has profoundly changed the mechanism of contemporary museums. As museums are inevitably becoming integral parts of consumer society, they are also steadily inclined to promote lifestyles in harmony with the goals of a capitalist economy than to criticize it. They are expected to serve the public that are consisted of two major components: the first is mainstream society, especially the middle and upper classes and the corporate powers; the second are the originating populations who are frequently lower in class. Therefore, to market themselves successfully to these differentiated population, museums are actually walking on the tightropes in seeking their support while asserting curatorial autonomy.^{xii}

The impact of the consumer culture to museums can be seen as below. To attract the differentiated visitors, museums would assume a populist approach, that is, exhibitions are like part of the leisure industry just to entertain the public. Architecturally, instead of being like a hermetic box or a mausoleum, the museum is designed like a showroom for the purpose of entertainment. Contemporary museums often look like hotel lobbies, museum shops are often part of the museum premise displaying items for visitors to buy. Moreover, the appeal to business sponsorship may include the use of museum space for corporate entertaining. Museums now are widely perceived as a vehicle for entertainment by displaying all sorts of curiosities, luxuries, wonders and extravagances.

However, there is a fear that museums will be transformed into another type of popular outlet ubiquitous in the urban culture of the 19th century like the shopping arcades, department stores, fun fairs and amusement parks.^{xiii} This "pleasure-house" model is actually a challenge offered by Disneyland.^{xiv} The founder of the Australian National Museum of Victoria once said, "a private collection can resemble a circus, a museum must not".^{xv} This creates a tension between democratization and professionalization,

between mass entertainment and art-history scholarship. This should be carefully handled, failing to do so would result in crass commercialism.^{xvi}

Another impact of the democratic idea is the framework of the “postmodernist critique” that claims all knowledge is relative, and every related party is given the right to speak for its own history; therefore, rather than simply being the mausoleums of the past, museums are urged to make the past more relevant to people today, thus imposing a challenge to the curatorial profession. In this regard, curators are decentred and given a new task to assist the public (including the ethnic minorities, the feminists, people with disabilities, etc.) to make their own statements for public debate rather than steering clear of it.^{xvii} This multi-cultural or the multi-vocal realities bring about an equalitarian society that nothing can claim superiority over others. The potential audience for the exhibition is encouraged to contribute to the display techniques and even the subject matter. Therefore audiences are much more actively involved in museums today. Rather than being a “visitor”, the subject becomes a “client” or a “consumer” where he/she has an equal position of power in organizing an exhibition.

As pointed out by Bennett, it is also important to retain a more statist approach as compared to the populist one, that is, to lift the cultural and intellectual level of the public as museums are doing in the past.^{xviii} There is no doubt that the public has the right to utilize the cultural assets in a more effective way, but as curators (or scholars) are experts in their own fields, he/she cannot be replaceable in shaping our knowledge on the collections. Democratization ought not to come at the expense of scholarship. This is in coincidence with the view that museums are places to provide “an elite experience for everyone”.^{xix}

b. Museums and the Art Professionals

Art professionals play an important role in the changing concept of art museums, their relationship becomes an interactive one. The term “art professionals” mainly means artists and architects in the following discussion.

The idea that the first responsibility of a public art museum to enlighten and improve its visitors morally, socially and politically throughout most of the 19th century is replaced by the ideal of the aesthetic museum in the 20th century. Over the years installation design has consistently and increasingly sought to isolate objects for aesthetic contemplation and to suppress any other irrelevant meanings the objects might have.

Museum space is made more intimate, amount of empty wall space between works is increased, and each work is lit individually to transform the museum space into sacred space. When visitors to art museums are immersed in this environment, Bazin described that “the act of looking becomes a sort of trance uniting spectator and masterpiece”.^{xx} Museums continue to be the sacred space, but with a different content: it no longer to be primarily didactic, but for the worship of art.^{xxi}

However, in so doing, the art works are decontextualized from what they were originally produced or understood. This is not a new thing in the 20th century. Goethe, for example, was disturbed by Napoleon’s systematic gathering of art treasures from other countries and their display in the Louvre as trophies of conquest that took art works out of their lived settings and they were isolated in museums. In his *Lettres* of 1796 the French critic and theoretician Quatremère de Quincy also saw art museums as destroyers of the historical meanings that gave value to art.^{xxii}

In response to this, re-contextualization attempts have been made by artists and architects alike. I would like to follow the “container-contents” relationship of the architecture and the collections to illustrate the issue.

For the container-contents relationship, some architects attempt to create a dynamic interaction between art and architecture, but there is a debate on such a new museum typology that whether a museum building should be a passive or active container for works of art. In the late 20th century, the explosion of art forms such as site-specific installations, conceptual, video or performing art also necessitates a different kind of space to provide a different environment for these art works. The aim of them is to re-contextualize the art works in the specific space by actively relating the art works and the space embracing them.

As for the contents, that is, the collections or art works, there is a trend in the past decade that the museum collection has become a medium for artists to rearrange around a constructed theme.^{xxiii} This re-contextualization attempt may be related to the fiscal problem faced by museums today. By staging their own collections guest-curated by the artists, museums can avoid exorbitant insurance fees resulted from the bullish art market while continuing to offer diverse programming. But the worrying thing is that, this ignores the museum as a collective memory bank, and instead leads to the imaginary set of objects and ideas independent of the original contents of the art works. And again, this will also result in mass entertainment leading to the diminished role of professionalism.

C. Museums in the Information Age

In his famous essay “Museum without Walls”, André Malraux discussed on the impact of photography on the reproduction of art.^{xxiv} In his discussion, he deals with the museum “with walls” of the classical museum and the advent of the mechanical reproduction had brought to the breakdown of the walls of the museum. This coincides with Walter Benjamin’s ideas that the loss of aura comes as a consequence of the mechanical reproduction of art.^{xxv} Photography becomes a powerful tool to the dissemination of the images/reproductions of the art works. This facilitates the organization of art works in the desired orders and classifications. Theoretically speaking, reproduced images provide a useful tool for the reorganization of museum’s collections in many possible ways. The popularization of the Internet in the past decade renders the notion of “museum without walls” a reality, information flow outside the museum walls thus becomes unlimited and without boundaries.

On the other hand, the museum space is re-articulated and adapted to enable information flow to be more smoothly. This concept is known as the “intelligent” museum.^{xxvi} Through digital technologies, the information of the collections could thus be easily accessed by the visitors in the form of texts and images on computers inside museums. As a result, the space of the object and the space of the museum no longer exist as they were, but are immersed in the virtual space created by the digital technologies. This further expands the accessibility of the collections as compared to the invention of photography.

The world has become increasingly virtual in the digital age, but on the reverse, as original works or objects cannot be replaceable by any form of reproductions. This is because the experience of seeing and enjoying an original work through direct contact is a unique one which cannot be acquired by merely seeing a replica or a duplicate, therefore, museums will be more important than ever before. For Malraux, he also affirmed the place of museums in the future.

IV. Conclusion

The concept of museum has changed drastically as compared to the 1890s, and it has become a centre of activity including a broad range of educational activities, publications and exhibitions. It also forms an important cultural image of a city or country. Today, museums are under the challenge of the rapidly changing world with

persuasive media and advertising industries, instantaneous electronic communications, and a pluralistic culture in which the boundaries between high art and mass culture have been eroded. The major force for change is the process of democratization, which has been an integral part of the modernization of societies. Museums need to be reformed if they are to play useful roles in contemporary democratic society. Their future survival depends on its adaptability and how much diversity a society can tolerate.

Footnotes:

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- ⁱ Braudel, Fernand, translated by Mayne, Richard (1993), *A History of Civilizations*, chap. 18 “The Industrialization of Europe”, USA: Penguin, pp. 373-398.
- ⁱⁱ Ames 1992: 3.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bennett 1995: 189.
- ^{iv} Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 174.
- ^v Bennett 1995: 101.
- ^{vi} Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 190.
- ^{vii} Cole, Sir Henry (1884), *Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole, K. C. B., Accounted for in his Deeds, Speeches and Writings* (2 vols), London: George Bell & Sons, vol. 2: 368, cited in Bennett 1995: 21.
- ^{viii} Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 191-7.
- ^{ix} Cameron, Duncan F., “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum”, *Curator* (1971), 14 (1): 17, cited in Ames 1992: 21.
- ^x Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 190.
- ^{xi} Duncan 1995: 4.
- ^{xii} Ames 1992: 12-13.
- ^{xiii} Lorente 1998: 21.
- ^{xiv} The reference of the museum industry to the theme park business can be found in Margaret J. King, “Theme Park Thesis”, *Museum News*, September/October 1990, 60-62 or Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism Museum”, *October* 54 (Fall, 1990): 3-17.
- ^{xv} Goodman, D. “Fear of Circuses: Founding the National Museum of Victoria”, *Continuum: An Australian Journal of the Media* (1990), vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 18-34, cited in Lorente 1998.
- ^{xvi} Newhouse 1998: 190-2.
- ^{xvii} Bennett 1995: 102-5.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} Sherman and Rogott 1994 : 49-65.
- ^{xx} Bazin 1967: 265.
- ^{xxi} Newhouse 1998: 46-51.
- ^{xxii} Newhouse 1998: 47.
- ^{xxiii} Wainwright, Lisa, “The Museum as Mass Entertainment”, *The New Art Examiner*,

May 1994, pp. 14-18, 58.

^{xxiv} Malraux, André, (1954), "The Museum without Walls" in *Voices of Silence*, London: Sacker and Warburg, pp. 13-128.

^{xxv} Benjamin, Walter, (1973), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, pp. 211-44.

^{xxvi} Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 201.

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